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ABSTRACT

The meaning of academic achievement for African American students was studied in 2 populations, a sample of 145 (53% males, 47% female) African American middle school and high school students in an African American Academy summer enrichment program and 45 African American high school seniors (36% males, 64% females) in a summer program for students trying to gain college admission. Student attitudes were measured with scales that assessed the feeling that academic success equals selling out and that it represents acting white. No evidence of pervasive academically alienating beliefs among African American adolescents was found. However, a sizable proportion of students sampled did indicate some level of agreement with such beliefs. It may be that students in these summer programs place a higher value on academic achievement than does the general population. A strong relationship was found between academically alienating beliefs and a feeling of being threatened by seeking help. This finding may suggest that for African American students seeking help threatens their self-esteem and confirms the cultural stereotypes that African American students cannot succeed. Two tables summarize study findings. (Contains 7 references.) (SLD)

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Devaluing of Academic Success by African-American Students: On "Acting White" and "Selling Out"

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Academic success among students of color in middle and high school has been examined from a number of perspectives, such as differences between them and Caucasian students on the dimensions of self-esteem and self-concept. A more recent focus is on the social context of schooling and the meaning of academic achievement for student of color, particularly African Americans. Ogbu and Fordham (1986), for example, maintain that for African American students, academic achievement correlates with "acting white." Successful school learning is perceived as antithetical to race-related norms, i.e., an African American student who learns successfully may be seen as being assimilated into the majority white American cultural frame of reference at the expense of the students' own identity and achievement (Welch, Hodges & Warden, 1989). Steele (1992) further claims that this perspective is partially due to the devaluing of the student of color by the school system and society in general, and that school is the place where, consistently, African American students learn how little valued they are. They perceive themselves as outside of the norm, vulnerable to the labelling and stereotyping that defeats their academic potential. Students, in turn, respond to these messages by devaluing the process and outcomes of school. These claims, however, have not been subjected to empirical verification. This we have done in two populations of African American students, first by determining the prevalence of beliefs in academic success as "selling out."

We also examined whether beliefs about selling out are related to other student characteristics that would serve to hinder academic performance. One, recently cited as a critical component of a well-rounded and mature set of learning strategies, is academic help-seeking (Karabenick and Knapp, 1991). Students who devalue academic success should be less likely to seek necessary assistance, being especially concerned by its threatening implications of inadequacy. Also tested was the prediction that African-American students' beliefs in selling out would covary with: (a) perceptions of classroom teachers as less receptive to attempts to obtain necessary information through student questioning, (b) beliefs that teachers treat them differently than white students, and (c) lower efficacy and control beliefs. Finally, since the potential for academically alienating attitudes may be higher for men than women (e.g., Holland, 1989), we tested for the presence of sex differences.

Method

Participants and data collection procedure

Sample A. This sample consisted of 145 (53% male, 47% female) African American middle and high school students (6th through 12th graders) who were enrolled in the "African American Academy (A^3)" during the summer of 1992. The Academy's program, which provides enrichment (rather than

remediation), is open to any African American student living in the Ann Arbor community. The summer session lasted two-weeks during which students received instruction in math and science, participated in a field experience, and were given information designed to enhance their interpersonal efficacy. The efficacy unit involved: (a) discussions of behaviors that enhance or detract from having a positive school experience; (b) exploring the phenomenon of "acting white" and discussions of its validity in the student's life; (c) conflict resolution skills; and (d) training in school rules, useful skills, and school etiquette Data were obtained at the beginning of the first session, prior to exposure to any course content. It should be noted that the sample was very diverse both in terms of students' socio-economic background and academic performance.

Sample B. The second sample was much more restrictive. It consisted of 45 African American high school seniors (36% male, 64% female) from the Southeastern Michigan area who were enrolled in a summer program that allows students originally denied to earn admission to the university by successfully completing courses. The students were enrolled in two regular college courses and given supplemental instruction. Data from this sample were collected during the middle of the term. Participation was voluntary and completely anonymous.

Assessment instrument

Scales to measure the relevant variables were part of an extended survey of academic beliefs and attitudes. Selling out was assessed via a Likert format (as were all other scales—using a 7-alternative response format anchored with "Not at all true" to "Very true") with a single item for the first sample, "As an African American student, I believe that my friends will think that I am selling out if I succeed in school" and expanded by two additional items for the second sample: "I believe that it is 'not cool' to get better grades than my African American friends." and "My African American friends think that succeeding in school is "acting white." In addition to analyzing these items individually, they were combined (for Sample B) into a single scale to examine the relation of these beliefs to the other dimensions assessed.

A 6-item scale measured tendencies to seek needed assistance in school (e.g., "I ask my teachers to clarify concepts I don't understand well."), and a 7-item scale to measure threat to self-esteem posed by seeking help (e.g., I would think less of myself if I couldn't do my school work without help.") were included (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991). Students' perceptions of teacher support for classroom questioning were included (Karabenick, 1991), consisting of a 12-item scale (e.g., "In my experience, my teachers compliment students who ask questions."). A 3-item scale assessed whether students thought they were treated differently in school because of their racial identification (e.g., "I believe that my teachers treat students of different races

or nationalities differently when they ask questions."). Finally, the role of efficacy/control was measured using a 3-item scale (e.g., "I believe that no matter what I do I will not succeed in school.").

Results

Prevalence of beliefs in selling out and acting white

Table 1 presents the frequency distributions of responses to the items designed to assess selling out and acting white. The majority of African American students (63% from sample A and 77% from sample B) completely disagreed with the strong statement that their friends would think that they were "selling out" if they succeeded. There was, however, evidence that a sizable proportion (23% from sample A and 21% from sample B) that responded with some level of agreement, i.e., they saw the statement as somewhat true of them. Similarly, the statement that succeeding in school is "acting white" elicited complete disagreement from 67% from sample B. There was also some level of agreement from 25%. In sum, there was no widespread belief among the African American students in these programs that academic performance was non-normative. There were, however, students whose responses indicate they share this perspective. The presence of variation among students on this dimension permitted examining its relation to variables that affect academic performance.

Sex differences

Table 1 also presents information that tests whether academically alienating attitudes and beliefs are more prevalent among males than females. Sample A provides no evidence for this hypothesis. There is evidence, however, to support the hypothesis that academically alienating beliefs ("selling out" and that one is "not cool" to perform well in school) are higher for African American males than for females.

Relationships to other academic beliefs and strategies

Table 2 presents Pearson correlations between academically alienating beliefs and student characteristics that have the potential to hinder effective academic performance. Despite their dissimilarity, there is considerable consistency between the two groups of students. In both samples, the more that students agreed with academic performance as "selling out" or "acting white": (a) the less they reported they would seek assistance for academic problems, (b) the more threatened they were by having to seek help, (c) the less they saw their teachers as supportive of classroom questioning; and (d) the weaker their beliefs they were efficacious and controlled their academic outcomes. In addition, those in Sample A, although not B, perceived their teachers as not treating students of different races equally.

Conclusions and Educational Implications

In sum, there is no evidence to suggest pervasive academically alienating beliefs among African American adolescents. Nevertheless, a sizable proportion of the students sampled did indicate some level of agreement with such beliefs. Of course we recognize the limitations of these samples as not random or even representative of all African American adolescents. Those attending Academies and special summer programs undoubtedly differ in some respects from the general population. Specifically, they may come from families that place a higher value on academic success. Students who are academically alienated would have dropped out psychologically, if not physically, many years earlier. As a consequence of sampling, therefore, we may be underestimating the prevalence of these beliefs. If that is true, it is even more important that so many of the students reported any agreement with these strongly worded statements: For them, there is some evidence for the presence of conflict for African American students between adherence to their own and the dominant white culture.

We can conclude that the variation in responses to these statements is meaningful since they were systematically related to other academically-relevant characteristics that are, in turn, related to academic success. The extremely high relationship between academically alienating beliefs and help-seeking threat is especially problematic. It suggests that for African American students holding such beliefs, seeking help threatens not only their self-esteem but may also confirm the cultural stereotypes and racist views that African American students cannot succeed. Countering these pervasive negative beliefs and prejudices is critical for all culturally diverse students, since employing this learning strategy increases the likelihood of academic success. Perceiving teachers as not receptive to student questions and as treating students differentially as a function of race can be likewise alienating and conflict-producing. Along with perceiving lower levels of efficacy and control, the pattern of relationships should be troubling for educators at all levels. Even if not by some standards statistically pervasive, the presence of beliefs that academic success is a sign that one is "selling out" or "acting white" for any substantial proportion of African Americans should be cause for concern.

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Table 1. Prevalence of academically alienating beliefs: selling out and acting white

Statements	Percentage of responses: Not at all true of me 1	2	3	4	5	6	Very true of me 7	Means: Males	Females	Difference p
Sample A (N = 145)										
As an African American student, I believe that my friends will think that I am selling out if I succeed in school.	63	5	8	10	5	0	0	2.1	2.3	ns
Sample B (N = 45)										
As an African American student, I believe that my friends will think that I am selling out if I succeed in school.	77	2	2	7	5	5	2	2.5	1.9	< .05
My African American friends think that succeeding in school is "acting white."	67	7	2	9	2	6	6	2.0	2.3	ns
I believe it is "not cool" to get better grades than my African American friends.	82	2	2	7	2	2	0	2.4	1.2	< .05

Table 2. Correlations between "selling out" and other academic beliefs and strategies

Beliefs and strategies	Sample A (N = 145)	Sample B (N = 45)
Seeking needed help	-.17*	-.32*
Help seeking threat to self-esteem	.52***	.72***
Perceived teacher support of questioning	-.37***	-.24
Perceived equal treatment by teachers	-.18*	.03
Achievement efficacy and control	-.27**	-.47**

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$